



NY Times photoshoot with Ingrid Silva / Credit: An Rong Xu

Breaking Pointe:

The Institutional Racism In Ballet

Across the four major dance companies in the UK there are 262 dancers, but only 13 of them are Black. This is equivalent to 4.9%.

WORDS BY AMY MULLEN-BROWN

At its roots, ballet is White dominated and has not been very accessible to Black and POC individuals throughout history. Although things are getting better, ballet's Eurocentric ideologies create barriers for Black and POC dancers to this day.

Sandie Bourne, whose doctoral thesis looked at

the history and experiences of Black UK ballet dancers says: "One of the dancers I was speaking with for my thesis told me the patron said: 'I'm glad she's not playing the main role because that wouldn't be right; it has to be played by a White dancer.' These perceptions are still inherent in today's society.

"There is segregation from early on and it has been channelling through. You get to the 60s and 70s and they're still persisting with those racist ideologies. Even now, there are levels to it where Black dancers and Black children aren't able to progress. Black and POC dancers are commonly typecast and told to avoid ballet, all because of precedents set into place hundreds of years ago."

"The ideal human form" for ballet stemmed from its establishment with the royal courts in 1661, when it first became an art form. Greek and Roman sculpture has been identified as a source of inspiration and creativity for ballet with principles of aesthetic beauty consisting of purity, godliness and whiteness.

Ballets such as Giselle and La Sylphide in the 1800s impacted the social constructs of what ballet should look like. They showcased White ballerinas, described as symbols of femininity.

Eurocentric perceptions of the 'unsuitability' of the Black body for ballet have been well documented by dance critics and writers such as John Martin in the 1900s.

Bourne says: "Critics like John Marin and Ernestine Stodelle had this idea that African dancers should stick to African dance and Western dancers should stick to Western dance. Also, that Black and POC bodies suited the more sexier and eluring roles."

Dancer Sydnee Coggins from Georgia, USA emphasised how deflating it is to be conformed to these stereotypical roles.

She says: "In my school, the older years are known to get the big, magical, ethereal roles like Sugar Plum. However, I didn't even get a lead flower that year. That was still the base minimum; even my much younger friends were lead flowers.

"I was 'lead Spanish' and it sucked. If there is a person of colour they get casted in a POC role.

My role was meant to be sexy and sassy and appealing to the sapphire. It gave into the stereotype of a sexy Black woman and I was upset I didn't get the pretty, delicate roles like everyone else in my year.

"They avoided me or ignored me when I asked questions. People told me to not say anything as I would make the situation worse.

"I watched my friends perform those big roles. I even came back after I graduated and watched my younger friends perform the same roles and wondered why I didn't get them. It's almost like they can't fathom that you can do these roles too."

The colour barrier has been difficult to break. In 2015, Misty Copeland who is renownedly known for being a part of the change, became the first African American principle dancer to be employed by the American Ballet Theatre. It took 75 years for this to happen. Although, there have been others fighting for change way before this.

Challenging the colour barrier

1937- American Negro Ballet debuts.

1957- American Negro Ballet tours UK and receives backlash.

1969- Arthur Mitchell and Karel Shook founded Dance Theatre of Harlem.

1974- Mitchell and DTH came to the UK to tour.

1986- Brenda Edwards becomes first Black female dancer with English National Ballet.

2001- Cassa Pancho founds Ballet Black in London.

2015- Misty Copeland became the first African American female to become a principle dancer at the American Ballet Theatre after 75 years.

2019- Cassa Pancho's Ballet Black x Freed of London: released the first brown pointe shoes.

2020- Chloé Lopes Gomes spoke out against allegedly being told she was asked to lighten her skin for a performance of Swan Lake.

When looking at ballet in the present day, it's difficult to measure the progression of systematic prejudice and discrimination.

40 years ago, The Royal Ballet suggested that having a Black swan in the corps de ballet would be a distraction. The comment caused upset and provoked conversation about perceptions of the Black body and its 'unsuitability'.

But even in 2020, Chloé Lopes Gomes, a dancer with the Berlin State Ballet was awarded compensation as an alleged victim of institutional racism. The shocking allegation was that she was asked to lighten her skin for a performance of Swan Lake.

Swan Lake is a primary example where ideologies and socially constructed views have impacted Black and POC dancers.

Bourne added: "Change is easier said than done. When doing my thesis I found out that if anything from a ballet wanted to be changed, the artistic directors would have to go right back to the owners of the ballet and ask for permission.

"If the artistic directors wanted to modernise it and take out racist choreography/ segments, if they wanted the cast to be 50% black and have afros instead of neat hair (for example), it isn't fully the company's choice and their requests could be denied by the owners of the ballets.

"So how do you modernise a racist perception and choreography? A storyline made all that time ago? Awareness is needed and people's stories

and experiences need to be told.

"Black and POC dancers face huge barriers. We have seen individuals being told that they should avoid a career in ballet and stick to something with more 'beat and rhythm'. Do the historical aesthetics of ballet and whiteness still exist when directors cast black dancers for traditional roles? And where can we see change happening?"

"There are companies and individuals who are doing amazing things; It's progression. However, the UK is 10 years behind America, and that's concerning."

In Britain, the fact that there are still very few dancers of colour in top professional ballet companies, means that a lot of young dancers don't see representation. The lack of diversity in the industry begins very early on, when dancers are still in school.

Ruth Essel, also known as 'The Curvie Ballerina' on Instagram, founded her ballet school Pointe Black in London after not seeing enough representation for young dancers.

Ruth says: "Many issues occurred for me in ballet at a very young age. Every single dance school that I went to growing up required me to wear pink ballet tights/ ballet shoes which didn't match my skin tone. In my IDTA exams I could choose to not wear tights at all, but I was a teenager at the time and going through puberty.

"I even challenged an examiner when I was 16 saying that in the guidelines of the IDTA, it



Ruth (second in from the right at the top) and the Pointe Black school / Credit: Pointe Black

doesn't specifically state pink, it just says 'ballet tights and shoes' and that I am allowed to wear my skin colour if I want to. I was basically told that I wouldn't be let into the exam room if I wasn't wearing 'the uniform'."

Pink as the 'ballet colour' has been normalised since the beginning. Due to the first ballet dancers being White, the pink tights and shoes matched their skin tone. The lack of education relating to the 'ballet colour' has meant that it was rarely challenged.

Like many, the barriers that Ruth faced led her to not pursuing her dream career in ballet.

She says: "My teacher said to me that (not maliciously) the world isn't accepting of people like me: someone who is short, curvy and Black.

"It's definitely a double ended sword when it comes to me listening to my teacher's advice. Not pursuing my dream is one of my biggest regrets in life. But, being a ballet dancer felt so far-fetched to me as it was never encouraged."

Bourne added: "Teachers and instructors are working within a racist society with systemic perceptions of 'who belongs in ballet', the dancers are being gatekept."

Ruth continued: "They were right to say the world out there is just not ready for Black or POC bal-

lerinas, or short ones, or curvy ones because that was definitely the case in the Noughties.

"It was more of an anger to the system and the information available at the time. Whilst I was growing up I didn't see anyone like me in the UK mainstream media and that's why I created Pointe Black.

"MY TEACHER SAID THAT THE WORLD ISN'T ACCEPTING OF PEOPLE LIKE ME: SOMEONE WHO IS SHORT, CURVY AND BLACK."

"Everything that I do now for Pointe Black is all from my experiences as a young black dancer in the UK. To change the game."

Ruth has introduced new initiatives within her dance school to make the students feel like they belong in the ballet world. Her students do positive affirmations at the end of every class which makes the dancers remember their worth and potential.

Out of 262 people, here is the list of Black ballerinas in the top four UK companies:

Northern Ballet: Wesley Branch, Aerys Merrill.

English National Ballet: Junor Souza, Precious Adams.

Birmingham Royal Ballet: Céline Gittens, Tyrone Singleton, Brandon Lawrence, Gabriel Anderson, Regan Hutsell, Eric Pinto Cata.

The Royal Ballet: Joseph Sissens, Francesca Hayward, Joseph Aumeer.

NOTE: The Royal Ballet has 92 members, 3 are black.



The Black ballet dancers from the top four UK companies pictured in order of mention / Credit: The four companies

Sasha Jones on her first day at ballet class / Credit: Sasha Jones



Ruth says: “One of the tops from our merchandise says: ‘This ballerina has an afro’. That was actually something that one of the five year olds kept saying in class, so we put it on a top. The ballerinas absolutely love them and it creates a real sense of community.”

Structuring critiques around dancers as individuals is at the forefront of Ruth’s dance school. Biologically, Black dancers have a curvier spine so critique for a White dancer like: ‘tuck your butt in’, isn’t helpful to a Black dancer.

“Another example is turnout. You’re often taught that you either have good turnout or you don’t and this is simply not true.

“My awareness stemmed from a teacher telling me that Black people don’t have naturally good turnout or Black people naturally have flatfeet. These are all things that are very true; just not the end of that story,” said Ruth.

Despite America’s advancement overall, Sasha Jones from Texas spoke about her experiences with starting ballet in a state which lacks progressive legislation/attitudes. Sasha joined a ballet class in third grade and her story highlights the need for representation for and amongst young dancers.

Sasha says: “When I first arrived they asked me if I was ‘in the right spot’. Immediately my leotard was commented on and they told me to get a bigger size or to buy an undergarment as my ‘butt was sticking out’. I was only in third grade. I went to the shop with my mum and all they had was undergarments for White dancers.”

Sasha was told that it needed to look the same as everyone else’s and in her own skin colour. The problem was, nowhere supplied her skin colour.



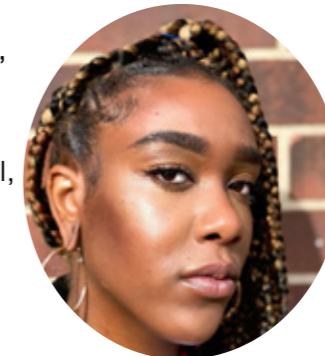
‘This ballerina has an afro’ top came from a phrase one of the five year olds said / Credit: Pointe Black

She says: “I was told if I couldn’t look the same as everyone else in the ballet uniform, I couldn’t be there.

“Then one of the other young girls said: ‘I don’t know why she came, she doesn’t really belong here’.

“It really upset me. My mum got a divorce when I was pretty young and so I had to have something to do after school until she got off of work. I tell people that I only did ballet for a few days but when they ask why, I lie. It’s sad because I completed other things and this was the one thing I didn’t get the chance to do and it sucks.”

Ruth adds: “It comes from traditionalist constructs implemented. What you need is an educator who knows how to give relevant help and not someone who will hold students back.”



Sasha now she’s older / Credit: Sasha Jones

“ONE OF THE GIRLS SAID: I DON’T KNOW WHY SHE CAME, SHE DOESN’T BELONG HERE”

When looking at the UK in comparison to the USA, we can see big disparities in the progress which has been made overall.

Dance Theatre of Harlem (DTH) was founded in 1969 by Arthur Mitchell and Karel Shook. It gave Black and POC ballerinas the opportunity to dance professionally in the USA.

In 1974, Mitchell came to London on a quest to prove that people from the African diaspora were also able to dance ballet. Performing at Sadler’s Wells in London was important to Mitchell as it was a starting point for DTH to be recognised outside the United States.

Many were doubtful as 17 years before, a company called The New York Negro Ballet toured the UK in hopes to change people’s opinions and were left with mixed reviews. Their show in London was also cancelled in 1957 which lessened their impact.

An unnamed critic from Edinburgh commented in response: “Able as these dancers can comport themselves in traditional classical ballet, it is a pity that they should waste their time on what is

not really their element”.

When DTH toured, they showed audiences that Black dancers could perform classical ballet, as they were still a rarity in British ballet at the time.

Cassa Pancho's Ballet Black was inspired by the likes of Arthur Mitchell and has been providing dancers of Black and Asian heritage opportunities in London for 20 years now. Ballet Black has a professional company of eleven dancers, as well as a dance school, which has a long waiting list due to the schools popularity.

Cassa says: “When it comes to progression, a lot of people have said over the years that we just have to wait for the old guard to leave or retire. I think that’s ridiculous. If we just wait then we’ll be here for 20 more years, without change.

“Ballet Black was set up to create a place of role models. Before Ballet Black, I was doing my dissertation based on Black British ballerinas. I had a load of questions for them, but there just weren’t any to even ask.



Ballet Black x Freed of London brown pointe shoe collection was released in 2019 / Credit: Ballet Black

“The only thing I could look at was an old video of Dance Theatre of Harlem on a VHS videotape, in the library of Royal Academy of Dance. That was my only access to seeing Black dancers. If a young Black aspiring dancer wanted to see that video, they couldn’t as it wasn’t accessible.

“What it shouted very clearly to me was, if there was no one to talk to, there was an even bigger issue. I wanted to ask about the racism these dancers had faced and how they overcame it, but there weren’t even dancers to interview, especially women.”



Founder of Ballet Black: Cassa Pancho / Credit: Holly McGlynn

“IF WE WAIT THEN WE’LL BE HERE FOR ANOTHER 20 YEARS WITHOUT CHANGE.”

Cassa spoke to a White dance teacher as a part of her final interviewees. The school that the teacher worked at had a Black student on the brochure, but there were no Black students.

She says: “Maybe when that student walked through the door they took a picture and then made that the marketing for everything. It really gave me a skewed perspective of what the school was like.”

Marketing strategies go further than school advertising. They have stretched to the realms of national ballet companies.

Bourne adds: “Precious Adams is an African American dancer with the English National Ballet. She was photographed solo on the poster for Swan Lake. You would assume she was the main character by looking at the poster.

“She was not. It’s revolutionary to have a Black female dancer on the front of a poster but it’s upsetting that she wasn’t the main character of Odette/ Odile.”

When it came to Cassa’s Ballet Black, she realised the importance of not just advertising Black dancers, but including them in every aspect.

Cassa’s initial thoughts were that if her company had a Black teacher, it could attract a more diverse range of people to the class as historical-

ly, the power dynamic was in the hands of White people and teachers.

“We found loads of dancers from all over the place, some were really good, some were not because they had been closed out of those opportunities. Having someone that looked like the dancers actually teaching, made an enormous difference,” says Cassa.

A year after the company, she started up the ballet school and taught young dancers from ages three to four. She has been running both ever since.

In 2019, Ballet Black partnered with Freed of London to create the first ever brown ballet pointe shoes. Prior to this release, ballerinas would have to pancake their ballet shoes to match their skin tone.

The process started with Cira Robinson, an American ballerina. She was at the counter of the Freed dancewear store, looking at the satins. Fed up of packaging her shoes, she asked if they could make her a brown pair.

Cassa says: “You could custom make any colour of pointe shoe under the rainbow, except brown. She was told if she came back with the satin in the colour she wanted, they could make them.

“She isn’t a shoemaker- she’s a ballerina, so I spoke with Freed and that’s when we decided to work together to make these shoes for Cira.”

No one knew about these shoes and Cira started to wear them during performances. A year later they were ready for commercial release. We got a lot of press around the new shoes and a lot of nonsense on social media saying how they are



Ballet Black’s 2022 company / Credit: Nick Guttridge

What is pancaking?

Pancaking is the process where ballet dancers have to coat their pointe shoes with foundations & paint to match their skin tone. A ballerina sometimes goes through a pair of pointe shoes every week and because brown shoes were not available, Black and POC dancers had to colour their shoes time and time again. The pointe shoe elongates the leg and creates the illusion of a straight line from the hip to the shoe. If the pointe shoe doesn’t match the dancer’s skin colour, the line appears broken.

‘breaking traditions’ and ‘pink is the ballet colour’.

“It’s interesting, these shoes existed for a year before people knew about them. It didn’t upset anyone. It meant that the ballerina who they were for didn’t have to paint her shoes anymore. She was just getting on with her life and dancing in pointe shoes. Then, when we told people, they were upset and racist trolling occurred.”

This release was a pivotal moment in ballet history, Ballet Brown and Ballet Bronze were added into Freed’s pointe shoe collection for dancers to wear, no pancaking involved. That same year, Ballet Black joined Stormzy’s headline for a historic performance at Glastonbury.

“Stormzy couldn’t believe that brown pointe shoes hadn’t become available before this. It blew his mind because he doesn’t know how slow the bal-

let world moves. So we collaborated and showed everyone these new pointe shoes as the headliner of Glastonbury 2019.

“I was there at the side of the stage and when the dancers went out, the reaction... I just can’t even describe the atmosphere; it was like nothing I had ever seen.”

The performance from Glastonbury was televised. It reached thousands of people on the day and millions on iPlayer, beaming into people’s homes. The luck of this platform meant that so many were educated and the awareness of the new shoes spread far.

“IT BLEW STORMZY’S MIND BECAUSE HE DIDN’T KNOW HOW SLOW THE BALLET WORLD MOVES.”

Cassa added: “We blew up, but every third person that commented was complaining about ruining tradition. There were also comments saying: ‘why are you crying about ballet shoes when you should be upset about knife crime,’ you know of course, stereotyping and lumping people together as if every Black group must be connected.

“Feedback which stuck with me were comments from people my age (in their 40s) who had aged out of being a dancer, comments like: ‘The four year old in me is so happy to see these shoes, if they had existed before, maybe I would have carried on doing ballet and felt accepted.’”

Every ballet dancer has a brand of pointe shoes

which fit their feet the best. A pointe shoe which works for one dancer may not fit another and therefore it is important that all brands offer an inclusive range of pointe shoes.

In 2020, two petitions went viral, gaining over 300,000 signatures to demand Capezio and Bloch release inclusive skin toned pointe shoes.

There were hundreds of comments from people that didn’t know ballet shoes and tights were meant to match the dancers skintone.

Capezio responded saying from autumn 2020 inclusive pointe shoes would be available world-wide, yet two years later the UK still doesn’t have access to them. They also launched a new email wecare@capezio.com, which hasn’t been active since.

Bourne added: “When writing my thesis, it was very hard for me to find any data relating to Black and POC dancers in the UK. It didn’t exist. It’s hard for companies to know the demand for specific items if the statistics aren’t reported on.

“Petitions are a amazing for getting what people want across and making sure they are heard.”

Capezio refused to comment on why they haven’t kept to their promise of releasing these worldwide by 2020.

Bloch also commented on why their storefront in London didn’t showcase their brown pointe shoes up until this April and said: “Using the Tonal Pointe content is very important to us, and we have used it in our social media posts, store windows, dance magazine adverts, and it was recently the cover of our booth at London’s Move

It 2022 dance convention.”

Accessibility to inclusive dancewear is still very limited in terms of undergarments, shoes and tights.

Ruth, Pointe Black owner added: “I’m so frustrated. I was looking for hours to try and find my younger students affordable dancewear. I could only find places in America and I wouldn’t expect parents to pay the import fees. It feels like we are going round in circles.”

Dance Shop worker, Christin Kenny commented on how the shop she works at in Oregon, USA isn’t representative of what is advertised and accessibility issues.

“You would think that by now things would have changed. Sadly in many ways it hasn’t. A Black male dancer came into the shop to buy some tights. We had a colour chart (pictured to the right) with every tight colour that the brand offered. He was looking through it and trying to see which one matched his skin tone.

“The problem was, our shop only carried two colours and we didn’t order things in. We have a policy where even if we know we don’t stock an item, we have to go ‘check’ anyway. Knowing we didn’t stock any of the shades, I walked to the back room, looked around and came back to tell him we didn’t carry that colour. This went on for a good 10 minutes, each time getting further away from his skin tone. I “checked” each time, but knew I was never going to find anything. Finally he asked me to bring out the colours we did carry

“I brought him “Nude” which matches most white dancers, and “Carmel”. He looked at them very disappointed knowing neither was remotely close to his skin colour and laughed uncomfortably.

“I will never forget the disappointment on his face. Our store had a facade, making it seem like we carried more colours than we did.”

Vicky Hyde, 18, has also struggled to find skin coloured uniform in her local dance shops in Kent. The alternative for her is to wear bare legs or to wear pink tights.

She says: “I never really noticed my uniform didn’t match my skin tone because pink was always so normalised and I have always been surrounded by predominantly White dancers.

“You see the others wearing it and it is their col-

Comments from the petitions:

@S0ph._.1 : “Wait I never knew ballet shoes were meant to be skin colour? I just thought it was because pink was a ‘cute dainty colour.’”

@peuloose : “If this problem isn’t new, then why did it take so long to be noticed? We really need to pay more attention.

@gracelumpkinn : “Some of y’all are acting as if these tights and shoes are hot pink! The colour basically matches white skin tone.”



Capezio colour wheel

The colours the store carried are shown by the arrows.



Stormzy and Ballet Black headlined Glastonbury in 2019 / Credit: Andrew Timms & Alamy

our, then you see yourself wearing it and it's not your colour. I feel like people are watching me but I also don't see any options for my colour in many places.

“When we do shows it was either I wore tights not in my colour or go bare legged which isn't comfortable. I take the more physically comfortable option which is to wear the tights which aren't in my colour; but it makes me uncomfortable in many other ways.

“It's also uncomfortable in society to call people out, especially being younger, so I never really spoke to my dance teacher about how wearing these shades felt wrong for me.”

Hearing from a Dance Theatre of Harlem ballerina felt important to mention. Known for being a company whose ‘vision remains one of the most democratic in dance’; born from the civil rights movement, it shows the potential that Western societies have if they don't conform to Eurocentric ideologies. Derek Brockington has danced at DTH since 2018 and spoke about his gratitude for DTH.

Derek said: “When I came to DTH I felt like I could honestly express myself better. I had the ability to grow in a different way than ever before. I never thought I would have gotten to this point and I am so lucky to be here; pursuing what I love.”

“Growing up, I didn't have a lot of representation for what I actually looked like and identified with. Representation is really necessary. The work that we do at DTH and any of the work I create as an individual shows clear representation.

“It's about making sure black and POC dancers are able to see people who look like them, whether that's on stage or videos on social media to see that it can be possible.”



Derek Brockington first joined Dance Theatre of Harlem in 2018 / Credit: Derek Brockington